Combatting Guilty Feelings About Your Bipolar Disorder

by KIKI WOODHAM

Blame, Guilt and Bipolar

We've all felt it at some point. Everyone ever diagnosed with bipolar disorder in the history of the world has no doubt felt the same thing — gnawing, all-consuming guilt over their actions as a person living with a mental illness.

For me, it's everywhere, every day. I am impulsive and spend too much money. Guilt. If I were able to have a normal job, the extra money I spend wouldn't matter as much. More guilt. If I had a job and we had more money I wouldn't get so mad at my kids when they're wasteful or break or lose something.

We would be able to afford a nice vacation every year. My partner wouldn't be so stressed about the bills. We could have that little fishing boat we've wanted for so long. We could get a cleaner in once a week to clean up all the stuff I'm so incapable of doing. Oh god, my house is always such a mess; the people who have to live with it must hate me for it...

‘Everything Is My Fault’

Guilt, guilt, guilt. Because in my mind every bit of this is my fault — and that's just one, tiny area of the massive landscape of my guilt. I feel guilt when I can't sleep, guilt when I can sleep, guilt when I lose my temper, guilt when I have no sex drive, guilt because of my social phobia, and even guilt because I've gained weight on medication. Yeah. Everything is my fault because I'm bipolar and awful.

When you have bipolar disorder, it can feel like everything is your fault. We often feel we're ruining the lives of the people we care about through our illness. Sometimes we feel useless and inadequate. And too often (because even once is one time too many) we compare ourselves to healthy people and wonder why we don't measure up.

The trouble is that we're not supposed to be the same; we have an illness, and Joe Schmoe next door who seems to do everything 'right' does not.

When my daughter's teacher was diagnosed with breast cancer recently and stopped working because she was sick, nobody blamed her. We didn't wonder why she couldn't manage to keep up with work while undergoing cancer treatment — and neither did she. She knew she was very ill and needed to take care of herself. She didn't feel guilty because her students would miss her or because there was work that a healthy person could do that she couldn't.

‘It’s All In Your Head’

Many of us are conditioned by a society that hasn't been well educated about mental illness to feel guilty simply because our diseases are of the brain. They are impossible to see on any kind of scan, and there is no blood test that pinpoints our illness. We aren't able to objectively quantify our symptoms, because we all experience them so differently. There are no numbered stages like there are for cancer, and people can't see that we're ill in the same

way you can spot a cast on a broken leg. We've heard for so long that it's 'all in your head' that we don't even think before that guilt kicks in.

People may treat us differently or unfairly as a reaction to something they can't put a finger on, or have expectations we are simply unable to live up to or fulfill. We can be equally unkind to ourselves when we fail to remember that we have a chronic illness that requires lifelong treatment; we forget that we require care and help to get through life with this illness.

Acceptance vs Victimhood

There is a line, though, between acceptance and victimhood. I accept that my illness influences my behavior; I accept that I am different from people who are not bipolar, and that I will make different choices as a result. I know that others, even those with bipolar disorder, may not understand my actions and behavior. I also understand that it will probably be necessary to adjust my lifestyle in ways that healthy people don't have to.

I do not, however, just throw my hands up in the air and blame everything on chance and bipolar disorder. I'm not about to start doing or saying anything that comes to mind without first doing my utmost to consider the best course of action. Like someone battling addiction, I work hard each day to change the things I can, to accept the things I cannot, and to understand the difference between the two.

Even when I consider all these things, I still feel guilty. The best thing I can do about those feelings is to keep reminding myself that it is not my fault that I'm ill. I point out to myself that I'm doing very well in sticking with my treatment plan, taking medication, and doing my best to live the healthiest life I can. I keep trying every day, and for that, I can and should feel proud — not guilty.

So should you.